

From Cicero to Mohammed Atta: People, Politics, and Study Abroad

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Author's Preface

Formal classroom study is no longer the only—or even the primary—educational goal of many students who study abroad. Equally or more attractive to many are the possibilities afforded by overseas study for internships, apprenticeships, fieldwork, and humanitarian interventions, not to mention the long-standing interest in home stays rather than dormitory living at an academic institution. Such opportunities offer the double appeal of “doing good,” while at the same time broadening the student’s experience in preparation for careers in law, medicine, social work, teaching, and the foreign service, among other goals. Thus, they are simultaneously altruistic and pre-professional, if not explicitly vocational. Broadly grouped under the rubric “experiential learning,” institutions and programs that offer and support such study abroad experiences are enjoying a period of substantial growth. It is therefore hardly surprising that the many practical and theoretical issues surrounding experiential learning would attract academic interest, as evidenced in this special volume of *Frontiers*. The range of topics addressed in this one volume attests to the institutional and pedagogical complexity of experiential learning today.

My own contribution to the literature on experiential learning is intended as a reminder that however novel the term, and however modern (indeed, post-modern) many of the issues surrounding it may be, the phenomenon itself is anything but new. Experiential overseas learning dates back at least as far as when young Romans traveled to Athens to study at the feet of the great philosophers and rhetors; it also enjoys a distinguished history in both Western and non-Western societies. The examples I have chosen—17th century Russia and 19th century China—are but two, particularly fascinating and well-attested, examples of what seems a persistent

constellation of human impulses: to travel, to learn from travel, and to learn from travel by doing. Bureaucratic complexity and controversial policy and pedagogical issues are never far from these episodes of experiential learning over the centuries. My discussion concludes, for a number of reasons, with the most notorious foreign student of our time. For one thing, the ‘career’ of Mohammed Atta raises important questions that challenge our easy assumptions about cultural assimilation and the value of overseas vocational training. For another, his life and career both conform to and challenge an important paradigm I identify in experiential learning throughout history. Finally, his example reminds us that our appreciation of the novelty of our own experience is both confirmed and called into question by the search for historical context—learning how to learn from the past may take place more often in the library and the archives than in the field, but is no less experiential if undertaken seriously.

Introduction

The first ten years after the end of the Cold War witnessed a dramatic increase in international travel. Although affordable fares and ultra-long-range jets greatly facilitated this phenomenon, the causes ran much deeper. The expansion of world markets and the increased accessibility of “exotic” locales focused much attention on business and leisure travel as primary factors behind the surge in global mobility, but travel for educational purposes was also a significant component of the cross-border movements of people.¹ Rising levels of affluence in the developed world enabled more students from rich countries to spend summers, semesters, and years abroad; that same affluence also facilitated various programs to encourage students from the developing world to enjoy the academic benefits of North American and European universities. A perceived relaxation of international tensions in the wake of the Cold War, and a popular celebration in the West of the triumph of liberal democracy, both sparked an interest in learning about the global marketplace and acted as a catalyst for the various bilateral and multilateral agreements which provided the legal framework for the increased movements of peoples. Student visas

were a growth industry: from 1990 to 1999, INS admissions of foreign students (F-1 and M-1 visas) increased 74%, from 326,000 to 567,000 per year; and even larger numbers of American students sought educational opportunities abroad.² The Clinton years were truly a “Bill Époque” for international study.³

September 11 and its aftermath have cast a much harsher light on this heretofore glowing picture. The borderless blue skies of international air travel are now clouded with anxiety and uncertainty. Western students in general and American students in particular have had to reevaluate not only their sense of personal security but the depth and the sincerity of the “welcome” they hope to experience while living and studying in poorer and politically volatile parts of the world. Foreign students in America and Europe have come under increased scrutiny at every stage of their journeys, from applying for student visas overseas to complying with immigration laws while abroad. Although no moratorium on new student visas has been implemented in the United States, the very fact that such a proposal could be floated by a leading member of Congress—indeed, by a “liberal” Senator from a state whose economy benefited immensely from educated foreign labor during the 1990s—suggests how suddenly the entire climate surrounding the foreign student has changed in just over a year.⁴ Perhaps most tragically and most fundamentally, the foreign student has become a potential national security risk. John Walker Lindh was a foreign student in the madrasas of Pakistan; Mohammed Atta studied abroad in Hamburg and Florida, with lethal consequences. However politicized their actions, both of these men seem to have been motivated by deeply personal impulses.⁵ Further, the revelations of “Saddam’s Bombmaker” about Iraqi students in American graduate programs in nuclear physics offers chilling testimony to the state policies which often sponsor and support such individuals.⁶ Can we ever recapture the innocence of the “Bill Époque”?

We cannot, and we should not. The events of the past year are highly instructive for those who seek to understand the various contexts in which foreign study takes place. For one thing, they remind us that movement across borders is always political. This is obviously true in a moment of heightened international tension; but it is no less true when the unchallenged dominance of one nation and one political and economic system acts as the guarantor of global peace and stability. The foreign student is

a particularly interesting figure in this regard: if not already part of their native country's social and political elite, those afforded the privilege of study abroad can usually aspire to lives and careers of considerable influence and prestige. What they learn and what they do with their knowledge and skills are of considerable geopolitical importance. At the same time, the relationship between the personal and the political in the motives and the experiences of individual foreign students is complex. The foreign student embodies not only his or her own aspirations, but also some sense of the comparative prestige and global image of both his native country and the place where he is studying. Moreover, the various forms of sponsorship often compete and conflict with more private agendas. Whether exchange visa requirements to return to one's home country after a specified period, or mandates from state and non-state actors to put one's learning to specific social (or anti-social) purposes—the foreign student is always implicated in much larger historical and political narratives. Post-Cold War triumphalist prosperity was one such narrative; the War on Terror is another.

Although the technologies and the terminology—from biometric visas to suicide pilots—may be novel, the phenomena described above are anything but. On the contrary, they have shaped and informed the experience of foreign study throughout history. Indeed, some historical perspective seems particularly valuable at the moment, as everyone from deans of foreign students to consular officers on the front lines of visa issuance to individual students contemplating a semester or a year abroad confront the challenges of a suddenly altered international landscape. People have been crossing borders for educational purposes since antiquity; no journal article can do justice to the range and variety of human experience and political contexts represented by all such movements. But a number of widely disparate episodes may prove instructive. In the late Roman republic, an ambitious young lawyer traveled to Greece and Asia Minor to study public speaking; at the turn of the 17th century, a Russian czar sought the technical expertise to build a navy; and late in the 19th century, the Chinese court established and then terminated an educational mission to the New World. These “case studies” offer important insights into the diplomatic, political and strategic concerns that facilitate, sponsor, and shape the study abroad experience. They provide striking evidence that the consequences—both for a nation and for an indi-

vidual—of foreign study are often far removed from the goals and intentions that initially motivate the enterprise. And they shed new light on some of the underlying cultural and political issues that shaped the life of the most prominent of the September 11 terrorists. In short, they remind us that study abroad is inherently political, however focused on its potential for personal transformation the individual student may be. Finally, many of these case studies are great stories. Who among us who has studied abroad would not be delighted to recount much of what follows?

Cicero

Cicero was twenty-six years old when he left Rome in 79 BC to study rhetoric and philosophy in Athens and then Rhodes. Such periods of travel and study in the great intellectual centers of the Greek East had been available to privileged Roman men for at least a generation or more,⁷ and Cicero's father saw to it that his son—a scion of the provincial equestrian elite—received an education that would prepare him for success in the legal and political milieu of the capital's nobility.⁸ Indeed, Cicero might have left earlier for his two years of study abroad, had not politics both Italian and Asian intervened. Late in 91 BC, Rome's Latin allies took up arms in support of their demands for political equality in their relations with Rome; Cicero served in the campaign, first under the command of the father of Pompey the Great, and later under the future dictator, Sulla. At the same time, conditions in the Greek East remained volatile. From 89 to 85 BC, Mithridates, king of Pontus in northern Asia Minor, waged a campaign of conquest which brought his armies as far west as Greece, where he was welcomed in Athens; most notoriously, he ordered a massacre of all Romans and Italians resident in Asia. The Roman response was brutal: Sulla besieged and captured Athens, and forced Mithridates to surrender to Rome.⁹

Cicero was hardly idle at Rome during these years of international turmoil. By the late 80s BC, he was already well launched on his legal career.¹⁰ In particular, his successful defense of Roscius of Amerina on a charge of parricide in 80 BC had attracted much public notice. And the interest in scholarly production which would consume much of Cicero's later intellectual energies had already enjoyed a first expression as well, with the publication sometime in the early 80s BC of *de Inventione*, a treatise

tise on rhetoric. Moreover, the upheavals of the Mithridatic Wars had driven many Athenian intellectuals to Rome in search of security, including Philo, then head of the renowned Academy. Cicero was therefore able to complement his legal and rhetorical education under such Roman luminaries as Quintus Mucius Scaevola and his son with tutelage from Philo and other eminent Athenians—all without leaving the relative safety of the capital in the mid-80s BC.¹¹ Athens might remain the intellectual magnet of the civilized Mediterranean world, attracting those who aspired to learning and erudition; but Rome was the bulwark of its security, attracting many who sought refuge from the upheavals of international politics and warfare.

Audiences and tutorials with such men in Rome were clearly not sufficient, however: Cicero wanted to study in the centers of learning themselves. His stated goals were modest: his style of speaking had placed demands on his voice and lungs that he and others worried might ultimately endanger his health. Rather than forfeit his career ambitions—"I decided I would rather run any risk than abandon my ambition for rhetorical renown"¹²—Cicero hoped that studying speaking technique in Athens and Rhodes might improve his delivery and ward off any dangers to his health. And so he left Rome in 79 BC, and spent two years abroad, first in Athens, where he studied philosophy at the Academy under Antiochus, and rhetoric under Demetrius of Syria, himself an expatriate intellectual. After an intervening tour throughout Asia Minor, where he met with many distinguished teachers of rhetoric, Cicero ended his sojourn in Rhodes, with the same Molo whom he had heard in Rome just a few years earlier. However limited the goals with which he initially set forth from Rome, the experience proved transformative to Cicero: "I returned," he stated, "not only better trained, but almost a changed man."¹³ Certainly, he had improved his speaking style. But he had also revived his youthful interest in philosophy, which would provide him with both intellectual and emotional solace later in his life. The contours of a brilliant career, which would combine politics, the law, and serious scholarly inquiry, had begun to take shape. Cicero would experience setbacks in the future, some devastating; but he never abandoned the basic intellectual framework developed and nurtured during his years abroad.

In many important respects, Cicero's time in Greece and Asia Minor offers powerful testimony to the lifelong impact of a youthful period of

overseas study. Most obviously, Cicero realized the ambition that motivated his journey in the first place. He became a better, more forceful, public speaker; and he improved his physical health. In addition, he rediscovered and nurtured a passion for philosophy that would provide the counterpart of private reflection to his life of public service. And he gained some exposure to the wider world of Roman power in the Mediterranean, not afforded by his military service in Italy. Cicero pursued his career in the law court and the Forum rather than on the battlefield, but public life later called him overseas on a number of occasions. Some were moments of public service: he served as quaestor in Sicily in 75 BC. And some were moments of profound public humiliation: he sought refuge in Macedonia in 58 and 57 BC from the political designs of his enemies. Cicero remained self-conscious throughout his career about his lack of experience in the trenches of the *imperium Romanum*; but he could content himself that he had received the legal and cultural education that both put him at ease in the high culture of the Mediterranean world, and made him equal in intellectual pedigree to any Roman of his day.

At the same time, Cicero's career offers equally powerful testimony to the various ways in which the opportunity and experience of study abroad are shaped by powerful geo-strategic forces. The very political instability that brought leading Greek intellectuals to Rome also prevented Cicero from studying abroad at an earlier age. While abroad, he was the beneficiary not only of the Roman peace imposed by Sulla, but also of the prestige and deference accorded representatives of the conquering power. That respect was understandably tempered by resentment of the destruction which Sulla had inflicted in pursuit of his victory over Mithridates, including the sacking of Athens in 86 BC. Moreover, by traveling to Greece and Asia Minor for rhetorical training, Cicero participated in a complex process of cultural exchange, which predated the "current events" of his lifetime. The possibility of sending elite Roman men to Greece for their education, mentioned above, was one component of that process. But it also involved an entire system of cultural relations: between the intellectually prestigious but politically and militarily subservient Greek East, on the one hand, and a Rome confident in the superiority of its armies and political structures but anxious about its comparative levels of cultural refinement, on the other.¹⁴ Cicero enjoyed a career as statesman, lawyer, and political theorist, which uniquely negotiated

these various Roman and Greek influences. Its uniqueness lay in Cicero's singular talent and ambition; the dialogue between Roman power and Greek learning was much older, and would long outlive him.

Cicero's times abroad, and the social and professional opportunities it afforded him, are therefore part of much larger patterns in Roman politics and society. In fact, as we shall see, they are also part of much larger patterns that have shaped the study abroad experience in otherwise widely divergent cultures and historical periods. Professional training and personal growth take place in a dynamic context of political and cultural relations that both shift and persist over time. The contours of this paradigm of the foreign student experience are best appreciated from the accretion of further specific examples, however; and few are as colorful and dramatic as Peter the Great's Great Embassy in the last years of the 17th century, and the Russian students he sent to England and Holland to study in the years preceding and following.

Peter the Great

Many young Russians studied abroad during the reign of Peter the Great, but none was more famous than Peter himself. Although his formal education had been minimal, Peter grew up in a household whose Europhilia stood in stark contrast to the suspicion of foreign ways which dominated much of 17th century Russian culture. Not only his mother Sophia, but her principal advisor and eventual lover Vasily Golitsyn set an example of public and private enthusiasm for Western European culture and manners that deeply influenced the young regent.¹⁵ In addition, Peter himself had displayed since childhood a fascination with military affairs—and navies in particular—that made him acutely aware of Russia's comparative disadvantage in maritime power. It is therefore unsurprising that when the 24-year-old monarch traveled to Western Europe in 1696-7 to seek European allies against the Ottoman Turks,¹⁶ the great shipbuilding centers of England, Holland, and Venice figured prominently in his itinerary. Indeed, although the diplomatic rationale for the "Great Embassy" was solid, many suspected that it really served as a pretext for foreign study in "countries more civilized than his own," in the words of one Dutch diplomat.¹⁷ Peter's own declaration provides the most direct and compelling evidence: "I am a pupil and need to be taught."¹⁸

A czar is no ordinary pupil; but Peter went to great lengths to downplay if not conceal his regal status. Not only did he travel incognito on the Great Embassy, disdaining the accommodations usually reserved for visiting monarchs; he actually served as an apprentice on the shipyards of Amsterdam, earning a “diploma” in naval architecture from the master shipwright.¹⁹ In so doing, Peter was setting an example for the groups of young Russian men he would send to study the naval arts in England and Holland in the coming years.²⁰ Some of these men were sent abroad involuntarily, against the wishes of their wives and parents,²¹ and many were “welcomed” with considerable ambivalence by their British and Dutch hosts. They were billeted in homes where they faced huge cultural and linguistic challenges, among Western Europeans who often viewed them as little more than “baptized bears.”²² Their state sponsorship often enabled them to pay far in excess of the going rate for their apprenticeships, thus distorting the local markets for native apprentices.²³ They even raised important questions of economic policy and national security: the British were concerned that the young Russians doing apprenticeships in England would take back home with them skills which would ultimately compromise British commercial and mercantile opportunities in Russia.²⁴ It is therefore not surprising that the various issues raised by the presence of these foreign students on British soil—some of whom ended up in debt, in prison, or simply AWOL from their course of study—appears in the diplomatic correspondence of the era.²⁵

It is easy to understand Peter’s sponsorship of and participation in these periods of foreign study as one early episode in his well-known record as a Westernizing reformer. And it is important to acknowledge the significant social and professional opportunities he bestowed upon a group of young men of “diverse social origins [...] clerics’ sons and soldiers’ sons [...] gentry, the urban classes, and the various administrative ranks.”²⁶ Such an approach, however, overlooks two telling details. The first concerns the modesty of Peter’s initial aims in sending Russian students abroad. Russia had no indigenous educational traditions or institutions capable of training young Russians for the type of military achievements Peter envisioned for his people. The foreign apprenticeships were therefore intended to provide vocational training, and nothing more: “none was to return to Russia without a certificate signed by a foreign master attesting to the student’s proficiency.”²⁷ Second, many put their foreign train-

ing to unexpected and far-ranging uses upon their return to Russia: from diplomacy to portrait painting to travel narratives.²⁸ Indeed, of the first group of fifty men sent abroad, not one later became an admiral.²⁹ The impact of the study abroad experience on 18th-century Russian life was therefore both broad and deep. Russia had not only a world-class navy, but also increasingly Europeanized leaders and institutions. This may have exceeded Peter's modest ambitions for his foreign apprenticeships, but it was hardly incompatible with his broader vision for Russia.

A number of aspects of this fascinating episode in Russian history are relevant to the present discussion. First, time abroad is personally transformative on multiple levels. Most obviously, it provides professional training often unavailable in one's native country. Such training confers enormous direct and tangible benefits. This is particularly true for the student whose selection for foreign study is based upon merit, and whose social status and career opportunities will be enhanced at home as a result. For such men (and now women), study abroad is a means not only of vocational training, but also of social mobility. In providing such opportunities, the experience opens up hitherto unimagined possibilities for personal growth and accomplishment. The career of Ivan Neplyuev is particularly instructive in this regard.³⁰ Son of a small landowner, sent by Peter for naval training in Venice, he became not only Russian ambassador to Constantinople and a senator, but also one of the few memoirists of Petrine Russia.³¹ Peter himself, of course, attempted social mobility of a different sort when he worked in the Dutch dockyards—and this undoubtedly increased his appreciation of the opportunities he was offering promising but socially undistinguished young Russians.

However personal the individual experience, the political was never far from the surface of these Russian sojourns abroad. Peter's own studies on the Great Embassy were, of course, thoroughly politicized. The context was a diplomatic mission; the goal was to acquire the foreign technical expertise which would give Russia a competitive advantage; and the transparent conceit that Peter was not the czar but merely an ordinary workman only increased the sensitivity of his hosts to his constant well-being.³² Nor did that heightened sensitivity and deference preclude speculation about Peter's "true" motives for his trip. In Sweden, for example, Peter may have seen himself as a student, but the Swedes saw "a monarch and military commander whose father's army had besieged [Riga] only

forty years before.”³³ Politics even brought the Great Embassy to an abrupt and premature end. Peter was unable to proceed to Venice, and instead returned to Russia when a revolt of the Kremlin guards in Moscow in 1697 required his immediate attention. Nonetheless, as the examples of the various apprentices discussed above suggest, Peter’s experience differed in scale but not in kind from those of his subjects. They were strategic assets of the Russian state, and seen as such by their hosts. Changing political climates both at home and abroad—not to mention their own conduct—could affect their foreign stays at a moment’s notice. Many Russians who studied abroad would go on to positions of great influence in Russia’s foreign policy; they began their careers largely as pawns of it.

Underlying Peter’s strategic goals and the tactics he deployed to achieve them are the cultural politics of Russia’s relationship with Western Europe. We have already seen that a combination of curiosity, acceptance, suspicion and disdain greeted the Russians who studied in Western Europe in the early 18th century, not to mention Peter himself on the Great Embassy. However, it is equally important to note the complex attitudes with which Russians approached the issue of cultural exposure to Europe. Some conservative leaders were adamantly opposed to it; ironically, many of them had supported Peter as a young man in the hopes that he would roll back the Westernizing reforms of Vasily Golitsyn, who ended up as Peter’s rival in spite of the similarities in the two men’s vision for Russia.³⁴ This suspicion of foreigners and their ways found widespread support in 17th- and early 18th-century Russian culture. And Peter’s own perspectives on the issue were neither simple nor one-dimensional. He wanted to build a Russian navy, and to develop a highly trained professional class to manage the Russian state; in pursuit of this goal, he sought technical knowledge in the places where it was most fully developed. Obviously, such an approach reflected his own natural curiosity about Western Europe. In addition, however, Peter was profoundly conscious of Russia’s existing competitive disadvantage, and in awe of the military and technical achievements of societies like England and Holland, which he attributed at least in part to the secular freedoms their political cultures offered.³⁵ He therefore approached his project in Western Europe with a combination of Russian pride and ambition, and a gnawing sense of Russian inferiority. Perhaps this is why his stated ambitions were so modest: he hoped to be able to contain and control the foreign influence on

Russia, so that Russia would become a Great Power on its own terms, and not simply be overwhelmed by a European culture whose virtues aroused such complex sentiments in him and his people.

This episode from Russian history offers striking testimony to the role study abroad can play as a tool of state policy, and the complicated reactions it can provoke in both the sending and the host society. Part of that importance—and part of the appeal and vividness of the story itself—obviously derives from the personal involvement and sponsorship of a charismatic political leader like Peter. However, we should not confuse the importance of high-level sanction for such undertakings with the necessity for high-level initiative, as the following story from late 19th-century China and Connecticut attests.

Yung Wing

The career of the first Chinese preppy is no less remarkable than that of Peter the Great. Yung Wing was born into humble circumstances in South China in 1828. Proximity to Macao and Canton made possible attendance at English language schools in those cosmopolitan ports, and that in turn led to the Monson Academy in Massachusetts, and then Yale, where Yung Wing became the first Chinese graduate of an American university, in 1854.³⁶ His Yale experience both thoroughly Americanized Yung Wing, and left him committed to the betterment of China through exposure to Western education and professional training. He played football for Yale; became a naturalized American citizen; married the daughter of one of Hartford's most prominent doctors; and even volunteered to serve the Union during the US Civil War.³⁷ Indeed, when he returned to China upon graduation from Yale, Yung Wing's English was better than his Chinese, and he had to take language lessons to regain his facility in Cantonese.³⁸ At the same time, he wanted to devote his American education to the betterment of China, so that "through Western education China might become regenerated, become enlightened and powerful."³⁹ And he wanted to create for future generations of Chinese students an institutional structure, which would promote and support the type of education which serendipity had so happily bestowed upon him. Yung Wing's goal was the greater national glory of China, a China in which Western training in engineering and military science, "grafted to the

Oriental culture,"⁴⁰ would produce a world power to rival the "grasping ambition" of the United States and Western Europe.⁴¹

It would take nearly two decades before this dream could be realized. Opposition to foreign study existed at many levels of 19th-century Chinese society. Parents were reluctant to lose their sons—and often the useful labor they represented—to a foreign, virtually unknown world. (Even once the Mission was opened, parents would be paid stipends while their sons were abroad, as Yung Wing's had).⁴² Moreover, the Confucian mandarin class was vigorously opposed to the contamination of promising young Chinese minds with foreign ideas and habits.⁴³ Nevertheless, by 1871 a new era was opening in US-Chinese relations. Article VI of the Burlingame Treaty of 1868 gave Chinese and Americans reciprocal access to one another's schools; and increasing Chinese interest in the possibilities for "self-strengthening" offered by foreign professional training changed the perspective of at least some in the bureaucracy.⁴⁴ Yung Wing presented his proposal for an overseas Chinese mission to the authorities in 1870, and it was adopted. The Chinese Educational Mission to Hartford opened the next year to much high-level interest and attention in both countries.⁴⁵ Thirty boys aged twelve to sixteen were to be sent to the United States each year over a period of four years, and were to stay in the United States for fifteen years.⁴⁶ The ultimate goal was for them to attend West Point and the Naval Academy at Annapolis, and then to return to China to form a professional class that would lessen China's dependence on foreign experts.⁴⁷ Billeted in local homes and enrolled at local schools, the students were required to preserve their Chinese identities through Chinese language studies, as well as maintenance of the Chinese traditions of dress and hairstyle that would demonstrate their continuing loyalty to the emperor.

What politics giveth, politics also taketh away: the Chinese Educational Mission was abandoned in 1881, five years before its planned termination, and the students already in the United States were called home to China. High level American opposition to the Mission's termination included petitions from Mark Twain and Ulysses S. Grant, and an editorial in the *New York Times*.⁴⁸ But increasing American hostility to Chinese immigration—which would result in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and by 1880 had already resulted in riots in Denver⁴⁹—had

changed the climate of amity reflected in the Burlingame Treaty. Any special status the Mission might have felt it could claim for itself was shattered when American authorities made clear that Mission students would not be allowed to attend West Point and Annapolis.⁵⁰ At the same time, conservative Chinese opposition to the goals and potential results of the Mission had not abated with time; if anything, the headlong embrace of American culture by many of the Chinese students only confirmed the worst fears of the conservative Chinese. Many students adopted Western or American nicknames, ranging from “Ajax” and “Africanus” to “Cabbage” and “Yankee Kwong.”⁵¹ Some had cut off their queues, the braids that represented loyalty to the emperor; and one—“Munny”—had coxed the Yale crew to two victories over Harvard.⁵²

It is therefore not surprising that the boys received a lukewarm welcome at best when they returned to China in 1881. Their experience inspired the Secretary of the Chinese Legation in Tokyo to write a poem about “The Closure of the Chinese Educational Mission in America,” in which he bemoaned both the boys’ Westernization—in some cases, their conversion to Christianity—and China’s failure to include Western learning in the curriculum of the Imperial Academy.⁵³ Their official reception in Shanghai included “no friendly recognition, no kindly smile,” in the words of one returning student.⁵⁴ Nor was their reentry into Chinese society easy or smooth. For one thing, they had not completed their American education. For another, only Chinese education qualified them for Chinese civil service posts.⁵⁵ And like Yung Wing before them, many now spoke English better than their “native” Chinese dialects. Over time, however, their technical skills proved of considerable use to China. Although their official ranks remained low, “alumni” of the Chinese Educational Mission ultimately played key roles in industries as varied as mining, the railroads, and the telegraph.⁵⁶ One alumnus, M. T. Liang, held a series of coveted customs posts in Manchuria, Tientsin, and Shanghai, and in addition was Minister of Foreign Affairs under the Republic, and High Advisor to the Chinese delegation at the Washington Conference in 1921.⁵⁷ The turning point for many was China’s defeat by Japan in the war of 1895: cowed by what Western technology had enabled Japan to achieve, China could no longer disdain the talents of its American-educated citizens. Yung Wing’s dream was never realized precisely as he envisioned it; but neither did he pursue it in vain.

This fascinating episode in Chinese-American relations is instructive on a number of levels. For one thing, it reminds us that the personal experience of the foreign student, however personally transformative, is often fraught with tensions and disappointments. This is true both while abroad and after returning home. The Chinese students' enthusiastic embrace of American culture took place in a setting in which they were both objects of intense curiosity among their hosts, and subject to intense pressures to retain their Chinese identities. In addition, many undoubtedly shared Yung Wing's profound ambivalence about leaving family behind in China to pursue foreign dreams.⁵⁸ That such separation occurred when the boys were twelve can only have intensified their sense of dislocation in America, and they were made to feel equally out of place upon their return to China, as we have seen. Although China ultimately found a use for their skills, many years and many professional slights first intervened. (Yung Wing himself ended up losing his American citizenship, in 1898.)⁵⁹ At least some must have wondered if their time abroad had been worth it at all. Cicero easily resumed his legal career after his return from the East, and the Russian students enjoyed Peter's continuing sponsorship. The students of the Chinese Educational Mission had a rockier personal experience. For them, a life-changing experience was not necessarily socially or professionally enhancing.

In retrospect, this is hardly surprising, given the politics involved. In ways fundamentally similar to Peter's experiment in foreign education—which Yung Wing had explicitly cited as an inspiration for his own proposal⁶⁰—the Chinese Educational Commission was politicized at every level. Its origins were political, arising from both the terms of the Burlingame Treaty and Yung Wing's own exploitation of the official role granted him in the wake of the Tientsin Massacre to promote his idea for the Mission to the Chinese authorities.⁶¹ That idea itself stemmed from Yung Wing's profound sense of Chinese competitive disadvantage in relation to the West. The Mission's daily operations were also political. Yung Wing was assigned a conservative co-commissioner on the Mission, with whom he sparred constantly,⁶² and the Chinese authorities used the Mission as a beachhead for their diplomatic efforts in the Americas, to places as far afield from Hartford as Cuba and Peru.⁶³ Finally, the early termination of the Mission was, of course, highly politicized on both the American and the Chinese sides. Powerful support from leading

Americans was no match for the rising tide of anti-Chinese sentiment among the electorate and in Congress. Similarly, long-standing Chinese opposition to such exposure to foreign cultures, combined with anger and betrayal at the changed political climate in the United States and its impact on the Mission, drowned out Yung Wing's continuing advocacy of the Mission's goals. The Chinese Educational Mission was the stepchild of a complex politics, and its students were ultimately that politics' victims.

Nor is this politicization of the Mission surprising, if we consider the underlying cultural dynamics at work. The United States was a young nation and emerging world power, oscillating between inclusion and exclusion as it expanded its geographic reach and political and military power. China, in contrast, was a civilization that had endured for millennia and now found itself at a technological disadvantage to its much younger rival. Where once China had been the center of learning to which others flocked, it was now in the position of needing foreign experts in order to modernize itself. As the Secretary to the Tokyo Legation plaintively despaired,

*When our dynasty came to have relations with the Western regions
We were at the height of our power and prosperity ...
They all sent hither their young men
To study under the professors of the Imperial Academy ...
Oh! What a manifestation of grandeur!
Alas! It has become only a memory of the remote past.⁶⁴*

At the same time, a conservative Chinese bureaucratic elite resisted all efforts at modernization, in particular those that involved sending promising young Chinese overseas. In such a context, deep-seated cultural attitudes as much as the usual vicissitudes of interstate relations shaped the experience of the students on the Mission. Their ability to survive such crosscurrents and go on to make significant contributions to China's development serves as an example of the positive uses to which a complicated personal and political experience of foreign study can be put—an example we should keep in mind as we consider a more recent and less inspiring case study of the political context and impact of study abroad.

Conclusion: Mohammed Atta in Context

The three episodes analyzed above acquire much of their narrative power from their specificity of context and richness of historical detail. Common to all of them, however, are a few key themes that inform the study abroad experience across time and culture. One concerns the impact of foreign study on individual lives and careers. Even those with relatively modest vocational aims often end up in positions of influence and authority, attributable to the wider professional and cultural worlds “opened up” to them during their time abroad. At the same time, these highly personal experiences and biographies are shaped and influenced by politics in multiple ways, from the institutional structures which sponsor—or terminate—periods of foreign study to the shifting political and strategic relationships between the foreign students’ native countries and those where they seek education and training. Finally, beneath the ebb and flow of treaties, embassies, and other diplomatic maneuvers lay the persistent and persisting attitudes and habits of mind one culture holds about another. The foreign student embodies his native culture among his foreign hosts, and upon his return to his own people embodies the foreign culture in which he studied. The effect is often both to increase his symbolic potency and to further complicate his personal and professional experience. Therefore, while it is important to disentangle the personal and the political in the examination of the study abroad phenomenon, the two are ultimately inseparable. Politics shapes the foreign student’s experience; the foreign student becomes a political player and also a political and cultural symbol.

The educational career of Mohammed Atta embodies all of these tensions and complexities in the study abroad experience. The apparent ringleader of the nineteen September 11 suicide terrorist hijackers was also the most educated, earning a master’s degree from the Technical University of Hamburg-Harburg in 1999 in addition to the flight training he received in the United States.⁶⁵ For Atta, this training was simultaneously narrowly vocational, deeply personal, and highly politicized. Not only did his flight training prepare him to fly a commercial jet into a tall building; his German education also qualified him for a more benign calling, as an urban planner. Those who studied with Atta in Hamburg emphasize his interest in the technical rather than the creative

aspects of architecture and urban history. They also recall a uniquely focused and single-minded individual. Long before the September 11 plot was hatched, Atta was apparently a man on a mission, which encompassed both his formal studies—which Atta initially undertook unwillingly, at the behest of his father—and his personal piety and rejection of the seductions and freedoms of the secular, materialist West. In this sense, Atta politicized his overseas experience from the start, using his Western education to further reinforce his narrow understanding of his devotion to Islam. Unlike Yung Wing, for example, he became less rather than more Western during his time—a personal transformation no less significant than the broadening experiences of others.⁶⁶ In short, Atta politicized himself long before history politicized him.

Nonetheless, larger political forces in numerous ways shaped Atta's experience. In Egypt, the educated face bleaker job prospects than the uneducated; Atta's lawyer father saw in professional training abroad the opportunity for his son to escape the limited career prospects of his native country. Egypt's status as a staunch ally of the United States and Western Europe—and the generous welcome America and Germany extend to foreign students—facilitated his ambitions for his son. And Atta carried with him when he left Egypt at least some of the paradoxes of the modern Egyptian identity: intense pride in Egypt's long and glorious past; self-consciousness about its leading role in Islamic learning and modern Arab history; and frustration and embarrassment at its poverty, squalor, and corruption. Atta's thesis—a study of the urban history of Syrian Aleppo—addressed many of these issues. Atta both celebrated Aleppo's rich history as an Islamic city and bemoaned the increasing threat posed to it by soulless modern development. A research trip to Egypt exposed him to the incompetence and corruption of the Egyptian authorities and dashed his hopes of returning to make a positive contribution to Egypt's urban development. Surely, this research and this experience deepened Atta's alienation from the modern West; but it also put him at the center of a confluence of forces, both modern and historical. In this regard, everything about Atta's time abroad was political: the socio-economic conditions which drove him from Egypt; the political structures which facilitated his foreign study; the cultural attitudes he took with him; and the curriculum of his academic study.

These factors notwithstanding, Atta's career would have remained at

best a footnote to history—like some of the now nameless students sent to England and Holland by Peter the Great—were it not for the political impact of Atta’s actions. His identification as the ringleader of the September 11 terrorists has strained relations between the United States and two close allies, Germany and Egypt—Germany for its lax oversight of the Hamburg “cell” prior to September 11, and Egypt for the virulent anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism condoned in its semi-official press, not to mention its febrile, conspiratorial political culture. The fact that Atta and one of the other hijackers received their student visas six months after they died on September 11 has precipitated widespread reforms both implemented and proposed, from increased tracking of foreign students in the United States to heightened scrutiny of visa applicants at consular posts abroad. More fundamentally, Atta’s image, beamed around the world to millions upon millions of television screens, has become a potent symbol of everything from anti-Americanism to fanatical Islam to pure evil (and presumably, to some, of commendable heroism). While it is undoubtedly fair to say that Atta’s status as a foreign student is probably not the first attribute people associate with him, most are certainly aware that he received his “vocational” training “legally” in the West. He is hardly a positive poster-boy for the foreign student.

It is therefore important to recognize that Atta’s experience and career not only conform to the paradigm we have been discussing, but also represent an aberration from it. All of the forces that have shaped the study abroad experience throughout history are present in his case: the quest for professional training; the intensely personal nature of the time abroad; the larger political forces shaping the experience; and the long-term societal impact of the individual foreign student. But while people like Cicero, Peter the Great, and Yung Wing—along with their various “protégés”—represent variations on the ideal of what can be accomplished both personally and societally by study abroad, Atta represents the failure of that ideal. His inability or lack of interest in reconciling the various personal and political forces buffeting him is both a personal and a political tragedy. England was no less “alienating” to Peter’s Russian students, or Hartford to the boys on the Chinese Educational Mission; Cicero was no less single-minded, or willing to “run any risk rather than abandon my ambition.” But where others found opportunity in the midst of tension and pressure, Atta sought only death, and took thousands of others down

with him. Tragic as his story is, both the paradigm we have discussed and the examples cited in support of it should serve as a reminder that it would be equally tragic to abandon the ideal of what foreign study can achieve at the very moment when more rather than less international dialogue is so sorely needed.

Notes

¹ The involuntary “travel” of displaced persons as a result of the many vicious civil wars and cross-border conflicts of the 1990s forms the tragic counterpart to this accelerated movement of the affluent and those who aspired to affluence, although such persons will never show up in the statistics for international air travel, business deals, or student enrollments.

² <www.ins.usdoj.gov/graphics/aboutins/statistics/Temp99.pdf>.

³ I owe this lovely and evocative phrase to Professor Kevin M.F. Platt of the Department of Russian, University of Pennsylvania.

⁴ Senator Dianne Feinstein of California prominently displayed her proposal for a moratorium on student visas on her Website: see <www.senate.gov/~feinstein/releases01/stvisas1.htm>. The proposal received widespread media attention: for example, see *Washington Post*, 10/7/01, p. A1 (“Losing Track of Illegal Immigrants: Once in U.S., Most Foreigners Easily Escape Notice of INS”).

⁵ The best single account on Lindh to date is *Newsweek*, 12/17/01, pp. 30-37 (“American Taliban: The Saga of John Walker”); on Atta, see the concluding section of this paper.

⁶ Khidir Hamza, *Saddam's Bombmaker: The Daring Escape of the Man Who Built Iraq's Nuclear Weapon* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 20-23, 42-48, 127, 143.

⁷ By 119-18 BC, the Athenian ephebia was open to Romans. See H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 247, citing an ancient inscription.

⁸ Cicero explicitly mentions at least one other contemporary who studied rhetoric in Greece. See Cicero, *Brutus* 245.

⁹ This campaign is referred to as the First Mithridatic War. A series of skirmishes between Mithridates and one of Sulla's lieutenants from 83-81 BC comprises the Second Mithridatic War. A third ensued in the mid-

70s BC; ultimately, Pompey forced Mithridates to retreat to Pontus, where Mithridates enjoined one of his bodyguards to kill him with his sword.

¹⁰ As Cicero himself acknowledges, with characteristic modesty (Cicero, 91.314).

¹¹ As Cicero himself notes (*Brutus*, 90.311), violence broke out once again during Sulla's dictatorship. By this time, Molo, a "pleader and teacher" from Rhodes, had also arrived in Rome.

¹² Cicero 91.314.

¹³ Cicero 91.316.

¹⁴ For an excellent and nuanced discussion of this phenomenon, see Erich Gruen, *Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992), esp. 52-83 ("Cato and Hellenism"), 223-71 ("The Appeal of Hellas").

¹⁵ See Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great: His Life and World* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1980), 80-1. This remains the best general biography of the Peter the Great.

¹⁶ Ian Cray, "Peter the Great and the Creation of the Russian Nation," *History Today* 11:9 (1961), 76-85.

¹⁷ Quoted in Janet Hartley, "Changing Perspectives: British Views of Russia from the Grand Embassy to the Peace of Nystad," Lindsey Hughes, ed., *Peter the Great and the West: New Perspectives* (New York: Macmillan, 2001), 54.

¹⁸ Massie 156.

¹⁹ Massie 201.

²⁰ In fact, he had already begun to send Russians abroad prior to the Great Embassy. See Massie 149-51.

²¹ Not all were young: the oldest was 52. See Massie 150.

²² Quoted by Massie 173.

²³ Joan Lane, "Diligent and Faithful Servants: Peter the Great's Apprentices in England" (Hughes 76, 79).

²⁴ Hughes 83-4.

²⁵ Hughes 81-2.

²⁶ Max J. Okenfuss, "Russian Students in Europe in the Age of Peter the Great," ed. J. G. Garrard, *The Eighteenth Century in Russia* (New York: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1973), 137-8.

²⁷ Massie 150.

²⁸ Massie 144-5.

²⁹ Massie 150.

³⁰ See Massie 760-1.

³¹ Okenfuss 144.

³² Massie 180-3.

³³ Massie 171.

³⁴ Massie 104-5.

³⁵ Massie 784.

³⁶ Chinese students had studied in the United States earlier in the 19th century, but had failed to graduate. See Ruthanne Lum McCunn, *Chinese-American Portraits: Personal Histories 1828-1988* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1988), 17.

³⁷ Yung Wing, *My Life in China and America* (New York, 1909), 154. Although challenged by scholars in some of its details, this remains the best single account of Yung Wing's life and career. See also Edmund H. Worthy, Jr., "Yung Wing in China and America," *Pacific Historical Review* 34: 3 (1965), 265-87.

³⁸ Yung Wing 52-3.

³⁹ Yung Wing 40-1.

⁴⁰ Yung Wing 77.

⁴¹ Yung Wing 84.

⁴² Timothy T. Kao, "An American Sojourn: Young Chinese Students in the United States, 1872-1881," *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* 46: 3 (1981), pp. 72-3; Thomas E. LaFarge, *China's First Hundred: Educational Mission Students in the United States 1872-1881* (Pullman: Washington State UP, 1987, c1942), 33, 36; McCunn, 17.

⁴³ Yung Wing 181.

⁴⁴ Charles Desnoyers, "'The Thin Edge of the Wedge': The Chinese Educational Mission and Diplomatic Representation in the Americas, 1872-1875," *Pacific Historical Review* 61:2 (1992), 244.

⁴⁵ Desnoyers 246-7.

⁴⁶ Thomas E. LaFarge, "Chinese Educational Commission to the United States: A Government Experiment in Western Education," *Far Eastern Quarterly* 1:1 (1941), p. 62.

⁴⁷ Kao 67.

⁴⁸ LaFarge, *China's First Hundred*, 49-50; Kao 74-5.

⁴⁹ Daniel Rogers, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United*

States since 1850 (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1988), 59.

⁵⁰ Yung Wing 207.

⁵¹ LaFarge, *China's First Hundred* 54-5.

⁵² LaFarge 113; Kao 68.

⁵³ Translation of the poem into English, along with commentary, can be found in William Hung, "Huang Tsun-Hsien's Poem 'The Closure of the Educational Mission in America,'" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 18: 1/2 (1955), 50-73.

⁵⁴ Quoted in LaFarge, *China's First Hundred*, 56.

⁵⁵ Kao 66.

⁵⁶ Much of LaFarge, *China's First Hundred*, is devoted to this subject.

⁵⁷ LaFarge 110-1.

⁵⁸ Worthy, 267.

⁵⁹ Worthy 266.

⁶⁰ LaFarge, Chinese Educational Commission, 60-1.

⁶¹ Yung Wing 176-9.

⁶² LaFarge, *China's First Hundred*, 31.

⁶³ Desnoyers 242-3, 253, 255.

⁶⁴ Hung 51.

⁶⁵ The alleged "twentieth hijacker," Zacharias Moussaoui, received a master's degree in international business from South Bank University in London in 1995. See Richard Willing, "'Westernized Kid' Grows into 9/11 Suspect," *USA Today* 6/25/2002, p. 1A. Unless otherwise cited, all of the details about Atta's background and education discussed here are from Terry McDermott, "A Perfect Soldier," *Los Angeles Times* 1/27/2002, p. A1. Other discussions of Atta may be found in *Inside 9-11: What Really Happened: The Reporters, Writers, and Editors of der Spiegel Magazine* (New York, 2001), 179-88; John Miller, Michael Stone, and Chris Mitchell, *The Cell: Inside the 9/11 Plot, and Why the FBI and CIA Failed to Stop It* (New York 2002), 239-94.

⁶⁶ Indeed, fellow students at Cairo University, where Atta received his undergraduate training, recall him as "utterly ordinary [...] sharing all our fun times" (McDermott).